

PluPerfect Past

The Potomac River's Smith Creek and its perfect cove become a memory both bitter and sweet.

by

“Let’s go to Smith Creek,” I say, and you say, “Smith Creek sounds boring. It’s not the kind of name that smacks of romance and adventure.” I say, “That’s only because you don’t know it.”

It’s true. If you *did* know this two-mile-long Potomac tributary you would overlook its humdrum nomenclature and think only of its many charms—such as its supremely convenient

location near the mouth of the Potomac and its remarkable number of excellent anchorages. I can say without exaggeration that it has long been one of Rick’s and my favorite stops.

But Rick was not along the first time I ventured into Smith Creek. That was with college chum and occasional cruising companion Jean Briggs on a trip we made up the Potomac in my old but adorable Albin Vega 27. On that occasion, a breathless day in mid-summer, Jean and I headed up Jutland Creek, which branches off Smith just after Wynne, Md., a vestigial remnant of a fishing village. Point

Lookout Marina sits on that point of intersection, followed immediately by the venerable Corinthian Yacht Club. Like its progenitor, Jutland too boasts tiny creeks and pleasant coves, many of which are well suited to anchoring.

A few years later—again in the Albin Vega,

and again without Rick—I was sailing with our good friend Hal Slack when we ventured into Smith Creek again, this time after a head-butting day of beating up the Potomac into a strong southeast wind. With little forward progress to show for our efforts, we slipped grumpily into Smith Creek and stopped at the first likely anchorage we came across, a small cove opposite Wynne and just off a small county park with a boat ramp. There, in the final moments of a long summer twilight, we dropped anchor and collapsed, thoroughly discouraged with the day and each other. I stretched out on the cockpit settee and fell immediately into a hot sweaty but satisfying sleep. The following morning, an hour before first light, we hauled up the anchor and felt our way through the entrance channel’s elaborate S-curve back out into the Potomac. Our plan was to exit the Potomac before the wind returned to bedevil us. We did, but as the sun rose, it brought the wind tagging along right behind. But that’s another story.

In recent years, Rick and I have been to Smith Creek aboard *Moment of Zen* many times. About half the time, we’ve spent the night at Point Lookout Marina, where we can fuel up, wander through the boatyard and eat at the Sunset Cove Restaurant. Other times we’ve dropped anchor, either in that handy little spot where Hal and I stopped long ago, or in one of the coves farther upstream. The creek, in fact, has become our go-to stop on trips up or down the Bay.

But the reason I particularly mention Smith Creek is that our most recent stop there was easily the best of them all. It was mid-October, and Rick, ship’s dog Bindi and I were headed down the Bay to begin our annual trip south, hell-bent for warm weather. It was the kind of fall day that almost makes you forget the cold dark months to come: The sun was warm, the air was crisp and dry, and the leaves were that ideal mix of late summer green and high

*The sun was warm,
air was crisp and dry,
and the leaves were that
ideal mix of late summer
green and high autumn
red and gold.*





autumn red and gold. This particular day was just so perfectly right that, despite a lifetime of experience to the contrary and a firm grasp of the science of seasonal changes, we could almost convince ourselves that nothing would change. Life would go on like this forever. But it doesn't and it didn't, which I'll get to in a minute. But for those few hours it was perfect.

We had left Annapolis at first light, sailing when the wind blew and motoring when it didn't. When we neared the Patuxent River, we conferred as usual and decided we still had plenty of time to go on to Smith Creek.

As we passed Point No Point Light, the wind picked up and pushed us along to Point Lookout, where we turned upriver to hug the Potomac's north shore. It generally takes us about an hour at our speed (6 knots under either a moderate breeze or power) to reach Smith Channel's outer markers; with the wind on our beam, we made it in 45 minutes. We negotiated the S-curve and were soon steaming by Wynne, motoring into the wind, which still had a good fetch down the creek.

"Well, where will it be this time?" Rick asked, as he always did when we reached this point. I knew he would be eyeing the long transient dock at Point Lookout Marina, because in his logical mind it meant power to run the heater and internet access for catching up on the news.

But I had other plans. "I think the time has come to try out the little cove just up on the

right," I said. "You know the one I mean."

Of course he did. The one time we'd ventured in, it hadn't gone well. We had taken the dinghy across the creek from the larger cove where we had already dropped the

Bright autumn colors mirrored in the placid waters of Smith Creek.

OPPOSITE PAGE: **Rick after securing the dinghy on the beach.**

Cruiser's Digest

Point Lookout Marina (301-872-5000; www.pointlookoutmarina.com) has transient space, gas and diesel, pump-out and repair and haul-out facilities.

Corinthian Yacht Club (301-872-5187; www.cycchesapeake.com) often has space for transients.



anchor. A few minutes later, we had come zooming out as fast as our little electric motor would carry us. The cove was so well protected from passing breezes that it had become the pirate kingdom of a vicious band of carnivorous insects who clearly lay in wait among the oaks and pines until the happy day when a boatload of unwary cruisers happened in before thinking the thing through.

“This late in the year,” I said, “the cove should be pirate free.”

Rick gave me his “I’ve got six good

reasons why this is a bad idea” look, but didn’t argue.

So we lined *Zen* up with the off-center entrance to the little cove and slipped inside. Just beyond the entrance, the cove splits left and right to form a shape like a crescent moon. To the left are a few homes, but to the right is nothing but woods. We went right, following the curve of the shoreline until the entrance was lost from view. Here the air was utterly still, so still that the trees, dressed in their autumn best, were perfectly reflected

in the water and it was nearly impossible to tell where reality stopped and the reflection began.

We sounded the area in the center and found a consistent 8 or 9 feet.

There we dropped our new anchor. A few minutes later, the ship’s company scrambled into the dinghy and set off for our favorite beach, which lay across Smith Creek at the southern end of the large cove opposite our exquisite hidey-hole. Beaching the dinghy, Rick and I spent a happy hour scrambling over fallen logs and watching the ship’s dog scamper joyfully through the shallows. By the time the sun had fallen behind the trees, however, the human members of the crew were ready to pack up and go. The fuzzy one took a little more persuading, but was finally rounded up and reinstalled in the dinghy. All of the crew shivered when the full brunt of the wind hit us as we skittered between the two coves.

Back inside our little cove, however, the world remained unruffled, and soon we were tucked down below with two big bowls of hot soup and a fine bowl of kibbles. That night, if the boat moved at all we never knew it. And if the pirate hoards buzzed at the doorway, we never heard them.

In the morning, we lingered over coffee until the sun had risen above the treetops. We were in no hurry to leave this perfect peace. But of course we did, pulling up the anchor and turning our back on that sweet little cove.

“We’ll be back,” we promised as we rounded the bend and met the wind, which was waiting for us out on the creek. But here’s the thing: “We” never will. I will. And Bindi will. But not Rick. Despite all his good sense, Rick passed away quite suddenly and illogically in his sleep less than a month later, a few days after we had completed our journey south. So *Moment of Zen* and its diminished crew will go on, and without question we’ll come back to Smith Creek and that perfect little cove. But this time the pirates may get us because we’ll be sailing without our Voice of Reason. ⚓

Ships in the Night

On an overnight run up the Bay, the crew of *Moment of Zen* sees the Bay you don't see.



by

“A night trip up the Bay? No problem,” I said to my cousin Max, “I know the route like the back of my hand.” I know, that’s the kind of statement that has trouble written all over it. I knew it myself, as soon as it was out of my mouth.

At the moment, Max and I were sitting in the cockpit of *Moment of Zen* at Severn Yachting Center, which is on Virginia’s Severn River, the one on Mobjack Bay. It was about 3:30 on a late May afternoon, and we were waiting for good weather. I had my iPhone open to the Chesapeake Smart Buoy app so that we could keep an eye on Stingray Point buoy’s real-time numbers. An hour earlier, the site had shown the significant wave height at 4.3 feet with a wave every 1.9 seconds. For *Moment of Zen*, that’s the equivalent of jumping into a Vegematic. Which is why we were still sitting in the cockpit staring at the phone.

We knew from Vegematics. Early the previous morning we had motored optimistically into the open Chesapeake from Norfolk to be greeted by 4 feet of chop on the nose, stacked up closer than a box of doughnuts. By the time we’d passed the mouth of the York River we had had enough, and the ship’s dogs, Bindi and Sammy, were already sending out resumes to sheep farmers in Idaho. So we cut west into Mobjack Bay and the Severn River.

Now we were waiting for the seas to

calm—NOAA’s marine forecast was calling for one to two feet beginning late in the afternoon. Sure enough, at 3:30, the maximum wave height at Stingray had fallen to 2.5 feet and the significant wave height to 1.7, though the waves were still a staccato 2.3 seconds apart.

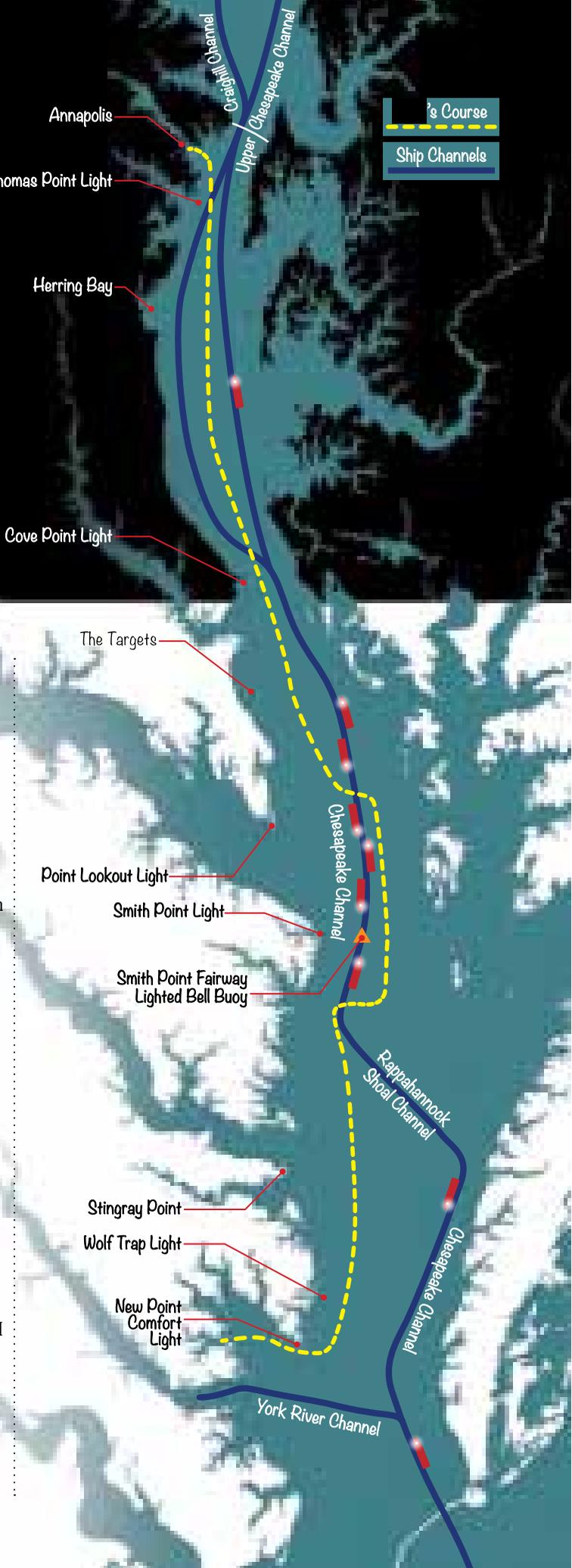
“Let’s give it a go,” I said, grabbing the leashes for a final dog trip ashore. “It should be a lovely night for a ride up the Bay.”

An hour later we were rounding the double green markers off the long Cedar Point shoal, two miles inside the mouth of the Severn River. Here the wind was light. We wouldn’t really know what we had until we came out from behind New Point Comfort, an additional six miles and a crazy quilt of crab pots later.

Meanwhile, it felt good to be back on the water and even better to be on the last leg of a trip that had started three weeks earlier on the Gulf Coast of Florida. Now, if all went well, our next stop would be home—Annapolis. On the down side, we still had the same north wind that had been plaguing us since Beaufort, South Carolina. There would be no sailing. We only hoped there would also be no bashing into a steep chop.

The late afternoon sky, gray and lowering, was not inspiring much confidence when we finally entered the Bay. But by then the north wind had pretty much blown itself out, at least for the time being, and the oncoming seas made only a friendly ploop-plop between the hulls.

At Mobjack Bay marker “2” we turned



north-northeast to cut just inside Wolf Trap Light. From there we would set a rhumb line for the Smith Point Fairway buoy. This turned out to be a fairly bad idea—and is the reason I’m writing this particular Log.

We were north of the Rappahannock, but south of the Great Wicomico when the color finally drained out of the long dark day and the world went monochrome, then black. We checked our steaming and navigation lights, threw a towel over the iPad at the helm (it never dims enough) and started the night-passage ritual of picking out lights. Then we checked each of the AIS targets on the chartplotter for heading, speed and closest distance—two northbound sailboats motoring close together about half a mile away from us to starboard, a third sailboat about half a mile behind them, and a powerboat moving quickly across the channel to intersect the outer Great Wicomico marker.

That was it . . . until a configuration of lights that looked like a portable city, but had to be a tug and barge arrangement, appeared out of the blackness beside us to port. It was taking an oblique angle toward the channel, probably meaning to reach it just south of Smith Point Light. We gave the tug operator a call on Channel 13 to check its route and to make sure it would pass well in front of us.

That done, we were just about to switch back to Channel 16, when we heard, “*Moment of Zen*, this is the Giant Ship Behind You.” (That wasn’t really its name, but that was a detail I quickly forgot after learning there was a Giant Ship Behind Me.)

“*Moment of Zen*,” I replied, somewhat taken aback.

“*Moment of Zen*, are you with the other two sailboats to your starboard?”

“No, we’re not.”

“Well I need all three of you to be in the same place. Can

you please change your heading east? I'm coming up the Rappahannock Shoal channel to Smith Fairway, and you're right in front of me."

Quickly Max and I looked back over our starboard stern and saw the lights, high up and bright and getting brighter.

"Ack!" I said and spun the wheel hard to starboard. "Roger that," I said, pretending to be all calm and professional like, "turning to starboard now."

Coming up on us from behind, his target had not yet shown up on the bottom of *Zen's* chartplotter, and we had been too occupied with the tug angling in front of us to look for traffic coming up from the eastern side of the Bay. Big mistake.

The shipping channel, in fact, comes up the Eastern Shore about as far as Occahannock Creek, then cuts diagonally across the Bay as the Rappahannock Shoal Channel. It shifts north again to round Smith Point Light at the mouth of the Potomac. There is

even a separation scheme here, with northbound traffic passing the yellow-lighted Smith Point Fairway Buoy to starboard and southbound traffic passing it to port. By coming up the Western Shore, as we were, and aiming for the Fairway Buoy—mostly because it made an easy target—we were inadvertently messing up that scheme.

A few minutes later, I checked back with the freighter to be sure we were far enough east to be out of his way. "You're fine," he said, "but you and those other sailboats might want to stay on Channel 13. It's going to be a busy night."

I don't know about those other sailboats—I don't think that they were on Channel 13 at all—but *Moment of Zen* took the hint. We stayed on Channel 13 and practically stood on our heads the rest of the night to be sure we were out of the way as ship after ship passed up and down the Bay. I'd never seen anything like it. As the ships moved by, the pilots conversed in

what I can only describe as magical pilot-speak. Pretty much all I managed to glean was that they were going to pass each other on "1" or a "2"—short for one-whistle or two-whistle passes—and that everybody would see everybody else in a couple of days.

The other two sailboats, I'm sorry to say, kept to the middle of the channel all through the night, leading to several polite but urgent calls on the part of four or five ship's pilots who were trying to avoid them.

Nevertheless, for a small boat in a busy body of water in the dead of the night, it's not as easy as you might think to stay out of the way. After green Chesapeake Channel Buoy "65", which is about mid-way across the Potomac, the channel going north is marked by red buoys only, all the way up to the Patuxent River. So how far from the reds is far enough to be out of the way? The answer is not so far that you run through the Targets—a restricted area that happens to be just off the rhumb line

between Smith Point and Cove Point.

At the north end of the Patuxent River entrance, the dimensions of the channel are marked by green Chesapeake Channel Buoy “77” and red “76” mark, which makes the channel virtually shore to shore. This continues north until just before the Bay Bridge, when the channel narrows. As you can imagine, this makes staying out of the channel another kind of a problem. Especially since the western side is narrow and the eastern side is chock-a-block with shoals and pound-net posts that often nuzzle right up against the channel.

But on the whole, wider is better and so easier to dodge Ents in the dark. Here too we could keep the chartplotter sufficiently zoomed out to see AIS targets several miles to our stern. Once we had that, we also had their course and distance. A relative walk in the park.

In any case, the sun reappeared before we had reached Herring Bay and the ship traffic dissolved like vampires in the light. On the other hand, a sharp offshore wind kicked up an annoying beam sea. But at that point, Max and I were ready to put up with anything. We could see the Bay Bridge and the radio towers ahead of us. The end was in sight. We pulled into *Zen’s* slip at Port Annapolis just as the Blue Angels began their practice warm-up for the Naval Academy graduation. Welcome home!

I’ve come up the Bay at night at least half a dozen times over the years, but I’ve never seen anything like the traffic we came through that night. It was nerve-wracking, yes, but exciting too. It sharpened our skills, taught us a little magical pilot-speak and served as a good lesson against complacency.

And the next time I go up or down an empty Bay on a weekday and think, as I have a hundred times before, “It’s too bad that nobody uses the Chesapeake anymore,” I’ll laugh at myself and remember that night, alive with the lights of a dozen great ships, moving swiftly and silently along the waters of the Bay. ↓

Fairlee Crazy Busy!

The author takes a few friends (and a deep breath) and heads for Fairlee Creek on a beautiful summer weekend.

by

A few months ago, during the high summer season, I gathered up my daughter Colby, friend Kathy and a few extra dogs and headed across the Bay for a weekend visit to Fairlee Creek. When I had first announced our destination, the reaction had run the gamut from incredulous to deeply incredulous.

“We’re what?” Colby had said.

“We’re going where?” Kathy had said.

“You’re nuts!” they said in unison.

I should explain that we are all three quiet, shy powder-milk-biscuit type people, generally averse to crowds and loud music. Fairlee Creek on a summer weekend, on the other hand, is the antithesis of quiet. Despite its tricky entrance and crazy current—or perversely, perhaps, *because*

of it—this short but well-protected body of water just south of Worton Creek is as popular with Bay boaters as fresh croissants in Cannes.

The spot is geographically constructed for fun. Just inside the winding entrance is a long lovely arc of sandy beach, and in front of that is a long bay with plenty of water for boats of every size and description. Opposite this, on its own beachy point of land, is Jellyfish Joel’s Beach Bar, an extension of Mears Great Oak Landing Marina.

On any given summer weekend afternoon, there will be a band playing at the beach bar, scores of boats anchored off the crescent beach, dozens of dinghies and personal watercraft zipping between the two, a steady stream of boats heading in and out the narrow entrance, and beer consumption that rivals the entire city

Cruiser’s Digest: Fairlee Creek

The entrance to Fairlee Creek is well-marked, but you must follow it to the letter. The channel runs just a few feet off the beach, and there is shallow water on both sides. The most challenging part comes at the narrow entrance to the creek itself, where the channel makes a sharp turn. If the current is running, it can push a boat out of the channel and into the sand in heartbeat. Although underpowered boats need to be particularly careful here, any boat can find itself shoved out of deep water with a moment’s inattention. The safest option is, of course, to check the current tables and arrive near slack water.

Once inside, there is plenty of room to anchor, though a short scope may be necessary because of the crowding (chain rode is a good choice). A second option is **Mears Great Oak Landing Marina**, which has plenty of amenities (including an inn and a 6-hole golf course) and caters to transient boaters (www.mearsgreatoaklanding.com; 410-778-2101). Those in search of something even more refined can choose nearby **Great Oak Manor Bed & Breakfast** (410-778-5943; www.greatoakmd.com).



of Milwaukee during a heat wave. Fairlee Creek at these moments is one crazy place.

Which is why my passengers were pretty sure I'd lost some marbles. But I hadn't.

"You wouldn't go to Camden Yards just to see the architecture, would you?" I said. "No, you'd also want to see a baseball game while you were at it."

They still looked skeptical.

"Well, Fairlee Creek wouldn't be Fairlee Creek if no one was there," I continued. "Fairlee Creek is all anarchy and chaos and people missing the channel and running aground. You know . . . fun!"

And, as it turned out, it was all of that. For example, just before we made the sharp turn into the creek entrance, a sailboat that paused to let a personal watercraft cut across the channel, got caught in the outgoing current, couldn't make the turn in time and ended up aground near green "9". The pontoon boat coming out right behind it fishtailed hard to make the turn up the outside beach and passed us nearly beam to, struggling to stay in the channel.

We got the hint and prepared for a full-on attack, with starboard engine in reverse and port in forward, ready to swing the helm hard over to starboard if push came to shove.

We were just ready to make our move when a small red airplane came out of the

entrance. An *airplane*, for Pete's sake! I almost turned around right then and there and went home. Boats are one thing, but airplanes, too? Really, this was too much!

But at that moment, the current gave us a great bullying shove, so I spun *Moment of Zen* into the current, and we pushed easily through the entrance.

OMG! I'd never seen anything like it. I've anchored in Annapolis Harbor for the Blue Angels and in Newport Harbor for the Bicentennial Tall Ships Celebration, but all that was mere child's play compared with trying to negotiate Fairlee Creek on a fine Saturday afternoon in late June. Every dinghy was piled high with people, dogs and drinks. Every PWC was writing its own navigation rules as it went.

Who knew where all the anchors and rodes were planted, why those people were jumping out of the boat with the motor still running? Or why some bright bulb was swimming across the entrance in front of a 50-foot trawler?

"Look out for that boat that just turned



ABOVE: Airborne cruisers anchor their seaplane on the beach. Left: The tight entrance to Fairlee creek.

around!” Colby said, pointing to starboard. “Wait, there’s a dog in the water over there,” Kathy said, pointing off our bow.

The Zen dogs caught the craziness too, caroming from one side of the cockpit to the other, barking at other dogs, people and the occasional waterfowl who had had the temerity to wander through.

Slowly though, we found that it all began to make a certain insane sense, and we spotted an empty place near the end of the line of boats. Here we dropped the anchor and shut down the engines—not that it made things one whit quieter. The band at the tiki bar had come off its break and was drowning out pretty much everything else.

It was time to get the full flavor of the experience. We lowered the dinghy, broke out the lifejackets (though from our observation they were not part of the Fairlee dress code) and aimed in the general direction of Watermark Grill, the Mears Marina restaurant. There we



ordered crabcakes and homemade chips to go, then found a patch of shade big enough to accommodate both dogs and people. For the next 20 minutes we ate silently as the sounds of classic rock and roll, laughter, shouting, occasional whooping and dozens of outboard engines filled all the available air.

After that, we wandered off toward Jellyfish Joel’s, as golf-cart taxis whizzed by us ferrying yet more people from the

Fairlee Creekers playing cornhole with a gazillion boats anchored in the background.

marina parking lot to the beach bar. Along the way, we spotted the little red seaplane we had seen as we entered. It was tethered to the beach with two stakes pushed into the sand, as a small crowd of admirers crowded around it and its two aviators, who looked as if they did this sort of thing every day. ►►►

We were soon distracted, however, by the efforts of a small boat to pull a good-size sailboat free of the sandbar off the beach. It was the boat that had seen pushed aground by the current while it waited for the PWC to clear its path. We were not alone in our fascination. Soon the shoreline on both sides of the entrance was lined with spectators, many of whom shared their good advice on the best way to proceed with their neighbors. "He'd be better off pulling backwards," one said. "He's just pulling it toward more shallow water," said another.

Despite the Good Samaritan's apparent failings, he broke the sailboat free of the sand at last. The crowd gave a great shout of approval and general applause broke out. There followed a momentary crisis as the sailboat moved dangerously close to the shore before the towline could be cast off, and the crowd sucked in its breath. Finally, the towline came free and a final cheer went up from the crowd as the sailboat turned sharply to starboard and motored out the channel and back to the Bay. The rescuer executed a snappy turn and went through the entrance backward, to the general approval of his audience.

But glory is short-lived, and the crowd's attention soon turned to a 60-foot Kady Krogen whose approaching shadow was sending PWCs, dinghies and pontoon boats scurrying for cover.

"Eat your heart out, NASCAR," Kathy said as we tore ourselves away in favor of a cold beer from the beach bar.

An hour later, we were trudging amiably back along the dirt track to the marina and our dinghy. "Okay, this is kind of fun," Colby admitted.

"Yes, this is definitely fun," Kathy said an hour later. By then we had landed the dinghy along the crescent beach behind the boat and were walking along the shore, letting the dogs splash in the shallows.

"Yes, I'm glad we did this," I said later that evening as we sat in the cockpit listening to the music and the laughter and the outboard motors of a dozen dinghies. "Once." ⚓